DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 315 211 RC 017 267

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TITLE Take Two: Lessons in Program Revision.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 15p.; In: Education and the Changing Rural Community: Anticipating the 21st Century. Proceedings of the 1989 ACRES/NRSSC Symposium. See RC 017 257.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academically Gifted; *Admission Criteria; Case Studies; *Curriculum Problems; *Educational Principles; Elementary Secondary Education; Program Evaluation; Rural Schools; School Districts; Selective Admission; *Special Education; Special Programs; Values

ABSTRACT

This case study describes a rural school district's problems with its program for academically gifted and talented students and illustrates the process and outcome of a program evaluation. The program came into being in a hasty and expedient manner that satisfied the superintendent's desire for the notoriety accompanying school improvement while avoiding resource allocation for curriculum reform. The original admission standard was a standardized test score of 85th percentile or above for total basic skills. In the first months of practice, however, the principals supervising program implementation chose to admit students on the basis of subtest, rather than composite scores. Then, the superintendent bowed to pressure from the board and agreed to admit any student whose parents requested it. As the teachers found that their "gifted students" could not handle the challenges of accelerated materials, they responded by presenting regular college preparatory materials but with more assignments. This response frustrated the brightest students and angered their parents. During program evaluation, teacher workshops, surveys, and interviews revealed that five program aspects were troublesome: (1) organization and coordination; (2) course requirements; (3) student selection procedures; (4) curriculum; and (5) standards for student retention. Values conflicts centering around student identification standards and the nature of program content paralyzed the staff's ability to take any action with respect to the program and led to program deterioration and teachers, parents and students disaffection. (SV)

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Take Two: Lessons in Program Revision

A Paper Presented
at ACRES Conference, 1989

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Submitted to ERIC CRESS
April 10, 1990

RC017267

Purpose

This paper reports a case study; its purpose is to illustrate the process and outcome of a program evaluation in one rural district. The case is a typical one: a rural district uncertain about the effectiveness of its programs for academically talented students. The results of the program evaluation are also characteristic; they show the way in which the effectiveness of programs for gifted and talented students can reflect diverse factors within both the school and the community.

This case study shows how school programs in a rural district developed and changed. It is, therefore, rooted in a real context; its actors are real school people; and their decisions reflect individual and cultural values and personal foibles. Like most case studies, this one relies on an observer's account of events. Such an account necessarily invades the privacy of a group of people. It justifies this presumption on the grounds that it can--through its detailed reporting of real events--illustrate general principles about organizational behavior. In reporting about particular persons and events, however, this case study does try to preserve the anonymity of the actors and protect the privacy of their context.

Context

District X is a relatively stable school district in the west-central region of an Appalachian state. It is stable

for a number of reasons:

(1) It has an industrial tax base that assures adequate funding for education.

(2) Its proximity to moderate-sized metropolitan areas has insulated it from dramatic population losses.

(3) Its distance from these same metropolitan areas has protected it from dramatic population influxes.

(4) Its board of education concerns itself primarily with policy and, consequently, limits its involvement with the routine administration of schools.

(5) Its central office staff is comprised primarily of locals, many of whom were raised in the county.

Within the last fifteen years, however, the school district has experienced some turmoil. The three superintendents who have had successive tenures during the period held different views about the purpose of education and, hence, each emphasized different school programs. The second of these superintendents (Superintendent B) made the greatest number of changes to the various programs (e.g., gifted, honors, A.P. programs) that purported to address the needs of academically talented students.

Background

As one of his primary goals, Superintendent B sought to advance the academic reputation of the district. He probably understood that a revision of the curriculum was necessary in order to accomplish this goal, but he was not able to structure the process of curriculum reform in such a way as to gain support for it from teachers, students, or parents.

Nevertheless, Superintendent B desired the notoriety that accompanies school improvement. In addition, his credibility with the board of education in part hinged on his ability to make good his promises: to increase test scores, to improve the county's performance in academic competitions, and to increase the college-going rate.

The superintendent was in quandary: he had set goals for the district that could not be accomplished without the support of teachers, students, and parents; and he lacked that support. To make matters worse, he did not want to allocate resources--either time or money--to the process of curriculum reform. His solution was expedient: (1) order the change to take place, (2) target the curriculum for high-ability students as the one in need of reform, (3) set up two or three meetings of teachers charged to design the new curriculum, and then (4) declare that a new program had been instituted.

Through this chain of events, the program for academically talented middle and secondary school students (the A.T. program) came into being. What characterized it, however, was unclear. Was it a program only for students who were talented? It would seem, according to the hastily written guidelines, that it was. These guidelines set a score for program eligibility: the 85th percentile or above for total basic skills on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS).

Even in the first months of the program, however, actual

practice differed from intended practice. The four principals who supervised the implementation of the program all believed that it would be unfair to use the composite CTBS score only. Therefore, they chose to admit students to the program on the basis of their CTBS subtest scores. Those with 85th percentile scores or above in a particular subject could take advanced courses (called A.T. courses) in that subject.

This modification of the guidelines was minor compared to the modification instituted by the superintendent at the behest of one--perhaps the most powerful--board member. According to this board member, the program's goal was to improve all students' performance; hence, all students should potentially be eligible to participate in the program. This interpretation, while logical on the surface, defied the logic underlying the program's development. It was true that the superintendent claimed and the board believed that the program would improve all students' learning; but, in fact, the program was designed so that it would only work for some students. The program allowed for some acceleration; it offered a more challenging presentation of material; and it was designed to be too difficult for many students.

Considering the board's expectations and his own mixed feelings about the program, the superintendent was unwilling to take a public stand to protect the limited mission of the program. Therefore, he instituted a modification to the program that seemed completely irrational in light of the

program's original premises. He decided that any student whose parents requested it could participate in the program.

This decision had profound consequences for the program. In the eyes of the principals, it further vitiated admission standards. Whereas in the first year of the program they were willing to alter the standards only for those students with high subtest scores, by the second year they were willing to alter the standards for almost any reason including administrative convenience. For the teachers who believed that they had designed a challenging program, the reality was hard to understand. It took the teachers a while to realize why the "academically talented" students in their classes were so slow to learn, so concrete in their approach, and so poorly motivated. Some teachers understood the phenomenon better than others.

Regardless of the degree to which they could explain the problem to themselves, the teachers responded to it in fairly similar ways. First, they altered the cognitive complexity of instruction. Like teachers in many programs, they geared instruction to the average level of the learners they encountered. Second, they grappled with the label. The program was supposed to be different from the regular college-preparatory program. But with the students that they had, how could they make it different? One way was to give more work. Although they covered the same content with their A.T. sections as they did with their college-preparatory sections, the teachers differentiated the assignments they

gave the two groups. The A.T. students were given the same kind of assignments, but they were given about twice as many of them. When college-preparatory classes were assigned one page of practice problems, A.T. classes were assigned two. College-preparatory English classes required one term paper; A.T. classes required two.

This response had some unanticipated and unwelcome consequences: it frustrated the brightest students in the schools, and it made their parents angry. The most vocal parents brought their concerns to the county office staff and eventually to the board.

In the meantime, the board had appointed a new superintendent. Neither he nor his newly constituted staff viewed the A.T. program as one of its primary concerns. Many other tasks were more pressing; but in March of 1988, the board member who had originally promoted the program brought its problems to the attention of the new administration. At this time, I became involved with the program.

Because I was a new member of the county office staff, I had no previous involvement with the program. My ignorance of the program's history enabled other staff members to view me as impartial. For this reason, the new superintendent charged me with the responsibility of evaluating the A.T. program.

Program Evaluation

To determine the needs of the program, I used a

procedure designed by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory. Because of the limited time and resources available to support the program evaluation, I chose to concentrate my work with the teachers who had designed the program and who now taught courses in it. The procedure I used included four activities.

The first activity was a workshop at which a group of teachers--about one-third of the teachers in the program--wrote need statements in accordance with a set of guidelines. These guidelines were developed so that participants could generate a large number of need statements, write the need statements using a consistent format, and edit the need statements for clarity.

The second activity was a survey to which all of the teachers responded. The items on the survey were the need statements generated during the first activity. Each need statement on the survey included three separate parts:

(1) a topic -- the subject of the particular need,

(2) a description of "what is" with respect to the particular topic (that is, the way things are now), and

(3) a comparable description of "what is preferred" with respect to the topic (that is, an alternative to the way things are now).

Teachers rated each need statement on a five-point scale that allowed them to indicate the degree of importance that they ascribed to that need. Each teacher gave high ratings to those need statements with which he or she agreed most strongly.

The third activity involved the analysis of survey results. I used several steps to develop an analysis that would relate directly to program improvement. The steps were:

(1) calculating the means and standard deviations of the ratings for each item,

(2) ranking the items on the basis of their mean ratings and selecting the top 20 items for further analysis,

(3) running a factor analysis on the top 20 items, and

(4) synthesizing the results of the factor analysis by giving names to the top five factors.

The fourth activity was a follow-up session intended to provide teachers with a summary of the purposes, procedures, results, interpretations, and implications of the needs assessment. By the time I conducted this session, however, I was in a different role with respect to the teachers because I had resigned my position in the county.

Survey Results

From the 20 top-ranking need statements, five factors were constructed. These five factors together were able to account for about half of the variance of these 20 statements. The other 50% of the variance was not explained by these factors--a result that shows there was considerable diversity of opinion.

In constructing the factors, I used the following criterion to determine which items to include in each factor: items were judged to contribute significantly to factors if

the factor accounted for at least 20% of the variance of the item ratings. This proportion of the variance is equivalent to a factor loading of .45.

Factors

I identified five factors. These are listed below along the items that constituted each of them.

FACTOR #1: GENERAL PROGRAM ORGANIZATION AND COORDINATION

ITEM 11: Currently some students who do not qualify for admission to the A.T. program are nevertheless placed in A.T. classes to ensure sufficient enrollment. It is recommended that only qualified students be admitted to A.T. classes even if this arrangement reduces enrollment.

ITEM 12: Current policy requires A.T. students to complete more homework than students in other sections. It is recommended that the policy be changed so that A.T. students are not required to complete more homework than other students. Instead, A.T. students should be given assignments that are more conceptually sophisticated than those given to other students.

ITEM 16: At present there is little coordination between the A.T. program at the middle schools and the A.T. program at the high schools. It is recommended that there be increased coordination between the middle and high school A.T. programs. Improved communication between all A.T. staff members is necessary in order for the program to be able to provide a continuous, well-articulated curriculum sequence.

ITEM 43: Currently, all sections of a course use the same textbook. It is recommended that A.T. sections use textbooks that provide a more challenging and more comprehensive presentation of the subject.

ITEM 67: Some A.T. classes require students to participate in out-of-school activities, such as science fairs and essay contests, that are not directly related to the curriculum. It is recommended that participation in such activities be optional.

ITEM 72: Too many students are currently scheduled into each A.T. class. It is recommended that class size for A.T. sections be reduced.

ITEM 74: At present students who are not doing well in A.T. classes are permitted to remain in these classes. It is recommended that students who are not doing well be removed from A.T. classes.

FACTOR #2: COURSE REQUIREMENTS

ITEM 55: Teachers in the A.T. program may not be aware of the requirements in other A.T. classes. It is recommended that A.T. teachers develop better means of communicating with one another.

ITEM 58: Currently, the same textbooks are used in all sections of a course. It is recommended that the textbooks selected for A.T. sections correspond to the scope and content of the material presented in these sections.

FACTOR #3: STUDENT SELECTION PROCEDURES

ITEM 1: At present any student who wants to get into the A.T. program is able to do so. It is recommended that admission to the A.T. program be limited to students whose achievement is in the top 15%.

FACTOR #4: CURRICULUM

ITEM 7: The current emphasis in A.T. classes is on increased amounts of homework. It is recommended that the emphasis in A.T. classes be on higher-order thinking skills rather than on large quantities of "busy work."

FACTOR #5: STANDARDS FOR STUDENT RETENTION

ITEM 49: Currently, there are no standards that students must meet in order to remain in the A.T. program. It is recommended that each student be required to maintain a certain grade point average in order to stay in the A.T. program.

Conclusions

Although there was considerable diversity of opinion regarding the needs of the A.T. program, there was also some degree of consensus. In general, the teachers seemed to agree that five parts of the program were troublesome: (1) organization and coordination, (2) course requirements, (3) student selection procedures, (4) curriculum, and (5)

standards for student retention.

In thinking about the first, and most significant, of the factors, however, I came to the conclusion that the program was hampered by more fundamental problems than I had originally suspected. This perception was confirmed by my investigation into the history of the program. Rather than being based on shared values, the program seemed to be based on a network of conflicting values. Historically, these conflicts were embedded in the negotiations between Superintendent B and the board. Presently, though unexamined, they are the reason for the county office staff's inability to take any action with respect to the program: either to restore the program's original premises or alter its premises. These value conflicts also may explain teachers', parents', and students' dissatisfaction with the program.

The value conflicts center around two issues: (1) whether the school should identify students on the basis of their individual characteristics and (2) whether programs for the academically talented should involve a more challenging academic content than other college preparatory programs. Opinions on both issues vary considerably, not so much as a result of individuals' roles within the school district hierarchy (e.g., administrator, teacher, parent). but more as a result of individuals' fundamental values and educational orientations.

The first issue describes the continuum between two

extreme views: the view that all students are equal and, therefore, should receive the same education and the opposing view that each student is unique and should receive educational experiences in keeping with his or her characteristics. In general, the more conservative school personnel subscribe to the former view whereas the more liberal personnel subscribe to the latter. General and special educators tend also to differ in their orientation with regard to this issue. Special educators tend to credit the importance of individual differences, and general educators tend to emphasize the value of uniformity.

The second issue relates to the first but is narrower in scope. Its context is the premise that programs for academically talented student ought to exist. Within this context, individuals have a variety of opinions about the preferred nature of such programs. Some personnel believe that such programs should present challenging academic content, others that they should require more work but not necessarily more challenging work. Still others believe that programs for academically talented students should present affective content (e.g., counseling) to counteract the negative effects of such students' internalized competitiveness and perfectionism.

As with the first issue, the variability in the opinions of teachers and administrators with regard to the second issue seems to reflect their differing educational and political orientations. In general, conservatives and

general educators endorse the view that programs for academically talented students ought to be more rigorous. Liberals and special educators tend to believe that such programs ought to provide primarily for the affective needs of academically talented students.

This analysis of value orientations suggests a curious dilemma. Those district personnel who support programs for the academically talented do not favor academic programs. Those that do not support such programs in principle do, nevertheless, believe that, when such programs exist, they should be academic. These findings seem to explain why Superintendent B found it so difficult to involve personnel in the process of program design. It also explains why, once instituted, the program deteriorated in the ways that it did. Finally, it suggests the intractable character of the problems that have confounded efforts to improve the program.